THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Orphans No More

May 9, 1999
John M. Buchanan

"In every child who is born under no matter what circumstances and no matter what parents, the potentiality of the human race is born again, and in him, too, once more, and each of us, our terrific responsibility toward human life; toward the utmost idea of goodness, of the horror of terrorism, and of God.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men
James Agee

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Acts 17:22-31

John 14:15-21

"I will not leave you orphaned; . . ."

John 14:18

Dear God, you love each of us as if there were only one of us to love, someone said. And so we come to you in that unconditional love, grateful beyond words. We are here together as a reminder that your family is big and diverse in every way, and more inclusive than we have ever been courageous enough to be. So as we join our voices, and our prayers and our speaking and listening, come to us and remind us that in Jesus Christ we belong to you and to one another forever. Amen.

Part of the secret of survival as a minister is knowing what local customs and celebrations are held sacred and inviolable by the community which has called you to be its minister and pays your salary. Christmas and Easter are easy. Smart ministers with an instinct for survival know not to mess too much with Christmas and Easter. Beyond that, however, communities differ. In some churches Scout Sunday is a major event, for others it's Youth Sunday. The police and fire department have a special day in some churches. Softball Team Sunday is a sacred occasion in one church I know. The rub is that these occasions, important as they are, do not appear on the liturgical calendar of the church year. They are not "official" church celebrations or festivals, and sometimes the purists among us hold out against them, as an intrusion of the culture, the florists and greeting card companies, into our sacred turf.

And the most volatile of these non-liturgical but culturally critical events is Mother's Day. Some ministers ignore it. Some truly brave, or foolish, critique it. Not I. I loved my mother. And even though she was mildly critical of the very idea of a special day to honor mothers, it was not a good idea to ignore the occasion. Her point, of course, was that there are wonderful women who are not mothers, who want to be mothers but can't be, or who chose not to be; and sometimes the day becomes deeply painful.

On the other hand, one of the things that happens on this day is that many families worship together. Every year sometime during the week before, someone inevitably will say to me "I'm bringing Mother to church on Sunday. Better make it good."

I found a little essay this week written by a man about children and parenting and pregnancy. He writes:

> "When we were expecting our first child, we decided we wanted to have five children. Then our first child was born and we thought two children had a nice ring to it. . . Then we became pregnant with our second child . . . When our first pregnancy test came up positive, I called a hundred of my closest friends. When our second pregnancy test turned pink, I called my therapist . . ."

The author, a Quaker by the name of Phillip Gulley, goes on to describe the way first children are treated very differently from any others who follow: "When a first child drops his pacifier, we boil it for ten minutes. When the second child drops her pacifier, we tell the dog to fetch."

But he concludes, "When I pray for my children at night, my affection for each is the same. I suspect that's how God must feel too. For God, every child is a first born." (*Front Porch Tales,* p. 92)

As a matter of fact, the most precious and provocative and theologically important biblical ideas of God are specifically parental. God in the Bible is like a mother who cannot and will not abandon her nursing child; God is like a mother hen, sheltering her chicks under her wings; God is like a father, running down the road to welcome home his prodigal son; God is like a mother who leans down and picks up her child.

The text for this Sunday, interestingly, uses parental language: "I will not leave you orphaned" Jesus tells his friends. The situation is tense. They are confused, afraid, emotionally fragile. They are at table on the night of his arrest. He is summing up, saying goodbye, preparing them for separation. "Where are you going? Why can't we go too? Do you have to go? Must this happen?" Fear, confusion, sadness. And he says to them ,"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also." And then he makes a promise. After he is gone, God's presence will be with them and will strengthen and encourage them and give them peace.

It is a profoundly and deeply theological part of the New Testament. And a few years later St. Paul will use the same ideas and some of the same words. On several occasions Paul will use the idea of adoption to describe the new situation that now exists because of Jesus Christ. In Christ, we have been adopted, Paul will claim. In Christ we have become children of God. And it's not just a change in the way we think about God for Paul. Our situation has changed. In Christ, God has come to us, chosen us, adopted us and we belong forever to God.

You may recognize some of the language we use in baptism. "Katherine Grace you are a child of God. You belong to Jesus Christ forever." And "See what love God has for us that we are called 'children of God.' " (See John Knox, *Life in Christ Jesus,* p.93)

When an adopted child grows and matures to that place where he or she needs to know how and why it all came about, the recommended approach is still to say something like

"We chose you. You just didn't happen. We picked you out. We saw you and said 'that's just the right baby for us.' "

"I will not leave you orphaned," Jesus said. And in that promise that we are never alone, never abandoned, never without the life giving presence of God, we live and move and have our being.

Alienation and abandonment from parents is, of course, a major motif in Greek and Roman mythology, a major theme in psychology and literature. Barbara Kingsolver's wonderful novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, is about a Baptist missionary and wife and four daughters in the Belgian Congo in the 1950's and 60's. The missionary, Nathan Price, manages to alienate his wife and daughters because of his religious zealotry bordering on fanaticism, which blinds him to the needs of his family and also the people he's determined to convert and baptize. It's a powerful book about 4 girls becoming young women trying to cope with alienation, estrangement and finally the disappearance of their father, and the subsequently complicated lives they lead in relationship with their mother who can never forgive herself for what happened in Africa.

The basic message of the Gospel, the blessed promise is that, in an ultimate sense, we are not orphans. We are children of God, we belong to God forever, and, in St. Paul's words, "Nothing in all creation will ever change that.

And in the meantime, because we are part of God's family, we share responsibility for all the children: our own, if we have children, our family's children, the children of our friends and neighbors, the children of the community and nation, and the children of the world.

Marian Wright Edelman, founder and President of the Children's Defense Fund, writes that as a parent she wanted to make sure that all her children's physical needs were met as well as their need for love. But, she writes, "I could not ignore other people's children or pain that spills over to public space and threatens the safety and quality of life and pocketbooks and futures of every American. I also wanted to make sure that I left (the children) a community and future more safe and hopeful than the one I inherited." (*Guide My Feet,* p.133)

The late Margaret Mead, distinguished anthropologist, observed that the nuclear family, mother, father and children, separated from extended family of aunts, uncles and grandparents, is a modern invention and not a very good one. It takes more than parents. "It takes a village to raise a child," the old African proverb puts it. It takes a community of care, attentiveness, discipline and love to raise children. And by any standard of measurement, American culture is failing miserably and desperately.

The parenting of children has never been easy, but my guess is that it has never been more difficult than it is today. Mrs. Edelman writes,

> "Never have we exposed children so early and relentlessly to cultural messages glamorizing sex, possessions, alcohol . . . Never have we experienced such a

numbing and reckless reliance on violence to solve problems, feel powerful or be entertained."

Parents I know are working hard at it, much harder than anyone before them, playing with children, reading to children, spending quality time with children. Not all parents, obviously. But even those who do must raise their children in a toxic environment that is a threat to their health and their lives.

Tobacco companies target them successfully, and with government subsidies assure that addiction rates remain profitably high, along with malignancy rates.

Gun manufacturers are targeting them. An industry spokesman was quoted in the paper last week in a speech to gun retailers: "There's a way to help ensure that new faces and pocketbooks will continue to patronize your business: Use the schools . . .it's time to make your pitch to young minds." (See Douglas Kmiec, *Chicago Tribune,* May 3, 1999)

In the name of welfare reform we just removed 30-40,000 Illinois residents from Medicaid coverage, most of them children. And even though the federal government has funds to help, states, including our own, aren't getting the job done. Essentially 10.7 million American children have no insurance or health care.

It's not easy to parent when the cultural context itself is hostile to your children.

The Columbine High School killers had seen on television and in movies in their lifetimes 200,000 acts of violence, 40,000 murders. (See "Watch and Learn", Gregg Easterbrook, *The New Republic,* May 17, 1999)

American children ages 2 to 5 today are watching television 27 hours a week. The American Academy of Pediatrics warns that 2 to 5 year olds are not able to differentiate between fact and fantasy. That's what it means to be a child. And so the number one influence in their lives, if they are spending 4 hours a day at it, is television. It is their source of information about reality.

The pediatricians refer to more than a thousand studies which prove the relationship between television violence and aggressive behavior.

And then, in a movement that is simply beyond belief, we have, in recent years, made it quite simple for children to have access to guns.

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold basically used four weapons; two sawed-off shotguns, an Intratec AB 10 and a TEC9, both semi-automatic pistols, and among the most popular assault weapons. They are not made to shoot at a target, or to hunt squirrels. They are made to kill people, efficiently, quickly. It appears now that three of the four weapons were purchased at a Denver gun show.

Thirteen children die from firearms in this country every single day, 91 a week, 5,000 a year. Since 1997, 60,000 Americans of all ages have been killed by firearms. In 1996 there

were two murders by firearms in New Zealand, 15 in Japan, 30 in Great Britain. Canada had 106 gun murders, Germany 213, the United States 10,744.

In the weeks before the Columbine massacre the Colorado state legislature was debating legislation written and promoted by the gun lobby to allow concealed handguns and to protect gun manufacturers from the kind of legal action currently being launched by the City of Chicago.

It's time for this sickness to end. It's time for the safety of children to count for something. It's time for the NRA to join efforts to end the killing of innocent children.

Orphans no more, Jesus promised.

And in his name and for his sake, this nation needs a rebirth of commitment to its children: their physical safety, their health, their education, their future.

Children need nurturing communities in addition to parents, communities that attend to them, stand with them and for them, communities to rebel against and criticize, communities to depend on. It takes a village.

That's why what we've done this morning in baptism is so critical to our life as a community of faith. We have affirmed our trust in the promises of God, the precious promise of Jesus that we are all adopted children of God. We have promised these parents that we will be a nurturing community for them as they parent, and for their children as they grow and mature through childhood to adolescence and young adulthood. And we have said that it is our mission in the name of Jesus Christ to stand with the children of this community: to be their friend, to be helpful, to be their advocate, to be people on whom they can count.

Michael Lindvall, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor catches the spirit of that in a chapter in a delightful little book, *Good News from North.Haven.* It's actually about his experience in a small church in rural northern Minnesota. In a chapter about baptism he tells about the time he found one of his members sitting alone, weeping, in the sanctuary after a baptism, which in this little church traditionally involved the grandparents and aunts and uncles all standing as the newest member of their family was held by the minister for the sacrament.

Her name was Mildred Cory and through her tears she told Michael that she had a new grandson and that she was thinking about his baptism. Michael told her to have Tina and her husband give him a call to make arrangements.

> "Tina's got no husband," Mildred said. She's eighteen, was confirmed in this church just four years ago . . .she started to see this older boy." She hesitated and then the rest of the story came tumbling out. She got pregnant and Jimmy joined the Air Force and she decided to keep the baby and she wants to have him baptized here, in her church, but she's nervous to come talk to you.

At that time and place Tina's situation raised eyebrows and was controversial enough that the Session had a discussion about the appropriateness of the whole matter before approving, which it did. The real problem, everybody knew, was when the minister got to the part when the whole family stands up and there wasn't going to be any, and her situation would be there for everyone to see.

So the day arrived, the last Sunday in Advent and the church was full. An elder announced "Tina Corey presents her son for baptism" . . . "Down the aisle she came, nervously, shaking slightly with month old Jimmy in her arms, a blue pacifier stuck in his mouth. The scene hurt all right, every bit as much as we knew it would."

'Who stands with this child?' Michael asked and Mildred, Tina's mother, stood up all by herself. Michael writes "I was just about to ask Tina the parents question when I became aware of movement in the pews. Angus McDowell had stood up in his blue serge suit, Minnie beside him. Then a couple other elders stood up, then the sixth grade Sunday School teacher stood up, then a new young couple in the church, and soon, before my incredulous eyes, the whole church was standing up with little Jimmy." (p. 168-175)

I will not leave you orphaned, Jesus promised, I am coming to you . . .

Thanks be to God.

Amen.